

Creating a Holy Community Rosh Hashanah 5784 Day 1

Interactive piece: turn to someone near you who you don't know, or at least someone you didn't come here with, and discover 3-5 things you have in common. If you need to you can move a little, and if you do this together among 3 or more people try to find 2-3 things you all share.

Human beings are wired for connection; we evolved to be together. We do not have claws or fangs, we lack massive size or speed, and so unlike the cougar or rhinoceros, early humans learned to stay in packs for protection. Since then, we have always lived in societies, and our essential human innovations are born of a need to stay together: language, agriculture, cities. Even the famous loner Henry Thoreau, out on Walden pond, delighted when he returned to his lonely hut and found that visitors had come by and left him notes of encouragement.

Our community here at Beth El arises from and for that very same need for connection. When I meet people here I feel almost immediately, right there on the surface, the connection which they seek.

Let me tell you some of their stories. There is the young mother, at home with two children under four, looking for a way to get them out of the house and engaged with Judaism. There is an older woman who is homebound, living alone just blocks from Beth El, but remains isolated because she has no way to get to services. There is a young man who performed beautifully at his bar mitzvah, but then stopped coming to services, needing some other way to access Jewish life. There is a father who wants to get more involved with Beth El leadership but is afraid that he won't be able to balance the added

responsibilities with those of work and parenting. There is a Jew by choice who came regularly to services and then suddenly stopped, no longer able to afford the standard membership fee, and assuming she was no longer welcome.

Each of these stories are different, yet each of them share a core element: a desire for connection to Jewish community, and an encounter with individual life circumstances that create barriers to get there.

There are so many things that keep us apart. Alienation, business, health and safety concerns, to name a few. But we are still human, and we still need each other. We need connection, tradition, community. So how do we come together?

This is no small challenge, as the issue of loneliness is a serious one in America today. Alongside the COVID pandemic came another threat, a kind of COVID co-morbidity: an epidemic of loneliness. The isolation that began as a health necessity did not subside along with infection rates.

The U.S. Surgeon general's office has called loneliness a top health issue in our country, ahead of Heart Disease, Cancer and Diabetes. Why? Because it turns out loneliness can aggravate all of these issues. Lacking connection can increase the risk of premature death at levels comparable to daily smoking. Their website asks, "What if there is something in our everyday lives that can transform our whole health and well-being? Something that can decrease the risk of... Heart Disease, Dementia, Depression and Diabetes?"

Surely, if there were a pill we could pop to perform this function, it would be a best-seller. But instead the answer is social connection, something that is not sold on shelves and which is notoriously slippery

and elusive. This is especially true in our era of long and hard work hours, deep socio-political divisions, alluring social media in the palm of our hand, entertainment streaming from the comfort of our couch, and a consumerist culture that directs our dollars towards objects over experiences or group memberships.

This reality has been in the making for some time. Twenty years ago Robert Putnam documented sharp trends toward social isolation in American life in his book “Bowling Alone.” His research noted disaffiliation across all social spheres, from country clubs to bowling leagues to churches and synagogues, and these trends have only become exacerbated in recent years by the pandemic and a life moved online. Everything from doctor’s appointments to grocery shopping can be done from the comfort of our homes, giving us convenience but also isolation.

American Jews mourn the loss of Jews in the pews, but this trend is universal. I remember last year traveling in Ireland and finding, in a small local newspaper, a front-page article about how Irish Catholics were no longer attending church, with younger Irish disaffected from religion and elders preferring the convenience of streaming services at home. Reading this, I laughed out loud, knowing I could have replaced the words “Irish Catholics” with “American Jews” and published the same article back home.

Yet even in an era that greatly motivates us to remain apart, we still harbor an inner need to be together and to belong. This essential truth was formed over millennia and is baked into our genetic makeup. It cannot be erased by a mere hundred years of isolating trends. The Torah, that brilliant record of human and divine wisdom from thousands of years ago, begins its narrative with a message about the importance of human connection.

After God completes the creation of the universe and places the human within the garden of Eden, God realizes that there is a problem: the human is alone. לֹא-טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ God says. It is not good for the Human to be alone. So God trots out all the wild beasts and the birds of the sky. And “the Human gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts... but no fitting counterpart for the Human was found.”

Connection to other life forms is wonderful, even essential for our well being. Interacting with plants and animals can heal us, and Americans have more pets per capita than children. Even sophisticated simulations of animals can generate positive reactions, and several companies now market robotic animals to homebound seniors. Even talking to Alexa or an animated lamp is proven to be better than no connection at all.

But God does not give the first Human a dog or a cat or even an Alexa, because nothing can compare with human connection. Then as now, there is nothing like the companionship of another being created in God’s image. So the Creator makes a companion for the human, and the human looks at his companion and has the profound experience of seeing himself in the eyes of another. “This one at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” he says.

At last. You can just imagine these first humans, who have never seen their own faces, with tears in their eyes as they recognize their reflection in another.

This is not just a story, but a message for the ages. Following this narrative the Torah states that therefore every person, upon leaving their home and family of origin, must seek new forms of companionship. We must find someone in whom we can see our own

reflection, of whom we can say, “I don’t quite know who I am, but I know this one is like me.”

We all know that need for connection, the need to see and be seen, to recognize our likeness in another person. We feel it in our kishkas. Even the introverts among us need the companionship of other introverts sometimes.

But as we know, it takes just the right person to feel that special connection. While Adam and Eve were created explicitly for each other, we who live on a planet of 8 billion people can find it harder to find the perfect mate. All humans are created in the image of God, yet each of us are unique and distinct, like many sides of the same die. As a result of this diversity, the rabbis say, it is as difficult for God to match two people together as it was to split the sea. Like the incomplete circle in the Shel Silverstein story, “The Missing Piece”, we go rolling and wobbling around, in search of someone to make us feel whole.

According to the US Census Bureau, 46% of U.S. adults are single—nearly every other adult aged 18 and over. The percentage of single adults has risen 11 percent since 1990.

It’s hard to find the perfect mate. We are each unique, and looking for something particular, so it can be difficult to connect. Like the woman who tweeted, “I saw a couple holding hands and it made me hopeful that one day I will meet someone who will hate them with me.” Or the shy guy who said, “my version of flirting is looking at someone I like multiple times and hoping they’re braver than I am.” Or the most pessimistic, “There’s plenty of fish in the sea but you know what else there is? Trash. There is a lot of trash in the sea.”

Though it has new dimensions, this is not a new problem. Humans have always struggled to connect, and have invented technologies to

improve their chances, from cave paintings to printing presses to dating apps. Religion is a technology of connection, too. The word religion comes from the word *religare*, to bind together.

Our own Jewish religion originated in a sense of the collective: the band of escaped slaves became the Jewish People in the desert, as they stood at Mount Sinai to make a covenant with God. This sense of shared experience and collective commitment transformed the Israelites from a group of tribes into a bonded nation, and so our religion began.

Once they bond at Sinai, God instructs Moses, *V'asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham*, let them make me a tabernacle so that I may dwell within them. This is often interpreted to mean that God wanted not just a physical dwelling place among them, but a space in their collective hearts. The divine presence on earth came to be known as the Shechina, and today, in the absence of a central tabernacle or temple, it is said to rest on any gathering of ten or more Jews in prayer. Gathering is our Jewish DNA and our *raison d'être*, our reason for being.

And so Judaism brings us together, constantly: from daily prayer requiring a minyan of ten, to the busy calendar of holidays, to rituals marking every phase of life, we are thrust together in myriad ways. None of these gatherings guarantees finding a perfect mate, but they do allow us to get to know our community, and discover connections we might have otherwise missed. Plus, doing this in an environment of soul searching makes us more likely to connect with someone who meets not just superficial criteria, but the deep needs of our souls.

Our continual gathering allows us to discover different points of connection. As a rabbi I am blessed to have intimate moments with people in all different phases of life and I am struck by the wisdom that

can be found within people of all ages. I get to sit with families as they remember a lost loved one, learning what memories stood out, what little sayings now seem profound, what they saw as the purpose of their life. I get to share the awe of new parents as they marvel over those aspects of life, usually taken for granted, miraculously replicated in their newborn: eating, smiling, burping. I get to sit with couples before marriage and learn something new about love. I get to talk with people as they retire, celebrate big birthdays, or travel to Israel. Each of these moments come with their own unique insight.

In the context of a synagogue, I learn wisdom from people of every age. I am often offered advice from Bubbies and Zaydes over kiddush, little golden nuggets that help me care for my congregation and family. I sit with young adults muddling through big life decisions. I spend time with children and glean their offbeat wisdom, dropped at random like lost pearls. Like when a friend of mine told me about taking her two year old to visit a new daycare. They asked her how she was feeling about having a baby brother, and she replied, "I have found a way to be happy." As though she were 2 going on seventy something.

Ecclisiastes wrote, "There is a season set for everything, a time for every purpose under heaven." So too, there is wisdom in each of these seasons, insights to be gained from any age. It can be meaningful to connect with others in the same phase of life, to share and seek advice, to recognize our image in another. It is also wonderful when Judaism brings us together across phases, reminding us of insights we might have once had or previewing what we haven't yet experienced.

Yet it is not enough to come together in broad, general ways. We need, as Pippin taught us, to find our corner of the sky. Our community will be stronger as a whole if we can help people find specific connections around common interests, corners of the sky to

which they want to return. Holidays can help, as they gather us around specific themes. On Purim artists and performers come together to create a Spiel. On Passover activists connect the message of freedom to oppression in today's society. The Days of Awe call out to spiritual seekers, those looking for partners on their quest for meaning. Sukkot caters to lovers of the outdoors and nature. And of course, every holiday has its own menu, with devotees of latkes, hamentaschen, matzoh balls, raisin challahs, or brisket.

We also offer a variety of programming so that people can choose what calls to them most. There are of course text classes and regular services, but also yoga and hiking, book clubs and concerts, shabbats honoring our pets or favorite football teams. We have programming for each age group, from Millennials to Prime Timers, families with young children and empty nesters. And of course, we have great food.

There are many people here who can help you connect. We have a fantastic staff who answer the phone and email at all times, ready with information about everything Beth El. We have a great Membership committee that reaches out to new and prospective members. We have just hired a new Jewish Outreach Coordinator, whose role will be to enhance and increase points of connection. I intend this to be my focus, too, this year. And I want to hear from you: how are you looking to connect? How could we be doing that at Beth El?

There are so many ways in which to locate ourselves within Judaism: by age, by phase, by passion. Judaism is a sophisticated technology of connection, and we need only to plug in to find meaning, tradition, and connection.

Earlier I recalled stories of people looking for connection. I also have stories of people who found connection. There is a woman who, newly retired without kids at home, has channeled her energy into the Beth

EI board and committees, making a huge impact. There is a widower who lost social connection when his wife passed away, and has now relaunched the social group that she used to run. There are people passionate about justice who came to our Social Action committee's mini-retreat and began to plan joint actions. There are people not born Jewish who arrived at Beth EI spiritually adrift, and ended up finding a home in Judaism and our temple. There are people in mourning who received shiva meals and ongoing phone calls. There is a young couple who connected through Jewish community and showed up together at Beth EI's barbeque and pool party this summer.

In the Belle Epoch, cafes were an epicenter of the artistic movement in Paris. Artists like Gertrude Stein, Matisse, Renoir, Picasso, Hemingway and Proust would come to the cafe to drink coffee, write or draw in notebooks, and meet other artists. Cafes were a place of energy, ideas, and connection. I want a synagogue that functions like that, where you can turn to your neighbor and discover a connection, formulate an idea, get inspired and create something new.

These are lots of people looking for connection, and there are lots of people finding it, in lots of different ways. And what about you? Where do you find yourself in the cycle of experience? What are your favorite points of connection? What is your missing piece? Where is your corner of the sky? Let's find it together.